They were some of the littlest victims of the Expulsion from Spain, those 2,000 Jewish children who were torn from the arms of their parents and exiled to a malaria-infested island located off the coast of West Africa. But they haven’t been forgotten. Until today, historians are trying to unravel the mystery of what happened to the children of São Tomé.

Do You Know the Way to São Tomé?

I was seriously thinking about asking Mishpacha to send me to São Tomé, until I learned two things about the island: malaria is still a danger and the one European airline that flies there — TAP Portugal — has only one flight to São Tomé a week. That plane makes its way from Lisbon to the Gulf of Guinea early on a Friday morning, lands and refuels at São Tomé’s tiny airport before breakfast, and then hurries back to Lisbon so quickly that there is still plenty of time to prepare for Shabbos. Did I really want to stay for a full week in such an isolated place?

The truth is that I probably needn’t have worried, provided I took anti-malaria medicine beforehand. Crime is practically nonexistent, perhaps because the local population is so poor that there is little to steal (although they hope to soon become

LOCATION: SAO TOM\nTIME: 2003

WHERE ARE THEY NOW?
The children who were sent to São Tomé were small children who were abducted from their parents, put on a ship, and sent to a place that had no access with the outside world... Therefore it is nonsense to speak about the children hanging on to their Yiddishkeit” — Professor Moshe Liba

very rich since oil deposits were recently discovered off the coast. And even though the country has experienced economic hardships and several coups in the three decades since it gained independence from Portugal in 1975, the approximately 150,000 people who live in São Tomé and the neighboring island that makes up the other half of the country, Príncipe, have a reputation for being polite and friendly. That politeness and friendliness is perhaps something of a miracle, given the country's often harsh colonial past. A breakdown of São Tomé's main population groups reveals that history in brief: mestizos, or mixed-blood persons, are descendants of the early Portuguese colonizers and African slaves who were brought to the islands from nearby Benin, Gabon, and Congo during the early years of settlement; Angolares, who are thought to be descendants of Angolan slaves; forros, descendants of slaves who were freed when slavery was abolished in 1875; and a few, contract laborers from Angola, Mozambique, and Cape Verde, who live temporarily on the islands.

One group that is noticeably missing is the Portuguese, who left the country en masse when São Tomé e Príncipe gained its independence. However, Portuguese continues to be the official language — even though many of the people who speak Forro, a form of Luso-African Creole — and reminders of the island's colonial past can be seen at the plantations that once provided São Tomé with its main sources of income. Some of those plantations are still producing crops of cocoa and coffee today, while a few of them have been converted into upscale hotels. Many of them, though, were deserted after 1909, when the international community boycotted the island's products due to the plantation owners' harsh treatment of their workers, and the rainforests have since reclaimed the once-cultivated land.

There is, of course, another group that is missing from the island's population roll-call today. He didn't want to lose. He therefore embarked upon a project that was as cruel as it was ambitious: he forcibly converted all of the Jews living in Portugal, both the Spanish exiles and the native Jewish-Portuguese population. By October of 1497 he was able to announce to his future in-laws, “There are no more Jews in Portugal.”

The Exile to São Tomé

As we can all imagine that the children who were among the island's first settlers, we must recall how they got there in the first place.

The First Exile: 1492

To the very end, the Jews of Spain prayed for a miracle; perhaps the cruel Edict of Expulsion would be annulled. But when Tisha B'Av arrived and the miracle didn't materialize, about half of Spain's Jews boarded rickety, rat-infested ships and set sail for Italy, the Ottoman Empire, and various ports in Northern Africa. The other half fled to nearby Portugal.

King João II of Portugal didn't open his country's border because he had a kind heart. He was preparing for a war against the Moors and he needed money. He therefore granted permanent residence to some 600 Jewish families who were able to pay a fee of one hundred cruzados. Some thirty craftsmen whose skills could be used in the upcoming campaign were also admitted. The rest — about 100,000 souls — were allowed into the country on the condition that they pay a “transit fee” and leave Portugal within eight months. If they didn't leave, they would become the king's slaves.

When the eight months elapsed, most of the impoverished Spanish Jews were still stuck in Portugal. They were given a brief reprieve in 1494, when Manuel I became the new king and the enslaved Spanish Jews were granted the enslaved Spanish Jews their freedom. However, when Manuel decided to marry the daughter of Ferdinand and Isabella of Spain, the Catholic monarchs insisted that he first expel all the Jews from his kingdom. Manuel was in a dilemma, since the Jews were a source of wealth and skilled labor that he didn't want to lose. He therefore embarked upon a project that was as cruel as it was ambitious: he forcibly converted all of the Jews living in Portugal, both the Spanish exiles and the native Jewish-Portuguese population. By October of 1497 he was able to announce to his future in-laws, “There are no more Jews in Portugal.”

The Expulsion

When the luckless hour arrived for this barbary to be inflicted, mothers stretched their faces in grief as their babies, less than three years old, were taken from their arms. Honored elders tore their beards as their babies, less than three years old, were taken from their arms. Honored elders tore their beards when the fruit of their bodies was snatched before their eyes. The fated children raised their piercing cries to heaven as they were mercilessly torn from their beloved parents at such a tender age.

Several women threw themselves at the king's feet, begging for permission to accompany their children; but not even this moved the king's pity. One mother, distraught by this horrible unexampled cruelty, lifted her baby in her arms, and paying no heed to its cries, threw herself from the ship in the heaving sea, and drowned, embracing her only child.

Later historians have charged Usque with being overly dramatic. But the basic facts of the story are confirmed by Rui de Pina, an official chronicler of the Portuguese kings. In his Chronica d'El Rei Dom João II, which was completed sometime before 1504, de Pina writes (translation by David Raphael):

In the year of 1492... the king gave to Navro de Carneiro the captnacity of the island of São Tomé of right and inheritance; and as for the Castilian Jews who had not left his kingdom within the designated date, he ordered that, according to the condition upon their entry, all the boys and young men and gels of the Jews be taken into captivity. After having them all turned into Christians, he sent them to the said island with Navro de Carneiro, as that by being secluded, they would have reasons for being better Christians, and the king would have in this reason for the island to be better populated, which, as a result, culminated in great growth.

What happened to the children when they reached São Tomé? According to Samuel Usque, they were abandoned on the shore, where most of them were either eaten by crocodiles or died of starvation. However, according to Rabbi Yitzchak Abzabrenow, who left Spain in 1492, with the exiled Jews and settled in Naples, the children met a very different fate. In his commentary on the Torah, Shemos 7:28, he writes:

The king of Portugal forced many children of
the Spanish exiles to adopt his faith. He sent them to São Tomé in 1994 not as an exile or a slave, but as Israeli first-nosser, ambassador to the modern-day country that is known as São Tomé e Príncipe.

What Do We Know?

In addition to being an Israeli diplomat, Professor Liba is the author or editor of dozens of books and articles. One of them, Jewish Gold Slaves in São Tomé, is a collection of scholarly articles that were presented at a 1995 international conference on the fate of the Jewish children, which was organized by Professor Liba.

One of the purposes of the conference was to see if scholars could agree on some of the basic facts concerning the children. The problem, of course, is that many of the historical sources present conflicting evidence. As an example, Professor Liba mentions that although there is a general agreement that the children were seized and baptized in the year 1493, there is a question as to how many children were abducted, their ages, and if only boys were seized. The consensus seems to be that both boys and girls were abducted. Although Rabbi Shimon ben Yehuda mentions just boys, three other sources mention both boys and girls; the Abarbanel's commentary on Genesis 7:28: the last will and testament of Captain Alvaro de Caminha, dated April 24, 1499, and the 1634 diary of a Catholic priest who lived on the island, Padre Rosario Pinto.

How many children were sent into exile? Most sources claim that about 2,000 children were forcibly baptized and put on the boats, along with a motley collection of convicts, priests, soldiers, and sailors. But some sources mention just 600 children. How can this discrepancy be resolved? One possible explanation is to reach the children. According to Professor Liba during a phone interview, he fairly bristled with indignation.

*The children who were sent to São Tomé were small children who were abducted from their parents, put on a ship, and sent to a place that had no access to the outside world. They were put in a Christian school and educated by priests with the goal of turning them into Catholics. They remained, who were not allowed to marry among themselves. Instead, they were forced to intermarry with the African slaves who were also brought to the island, as part of the King of Portugal's plan to create a new race on the island, which was intended to be a prosperous colony to fill the king's coffers.*

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The question of the children’s ages is important, because it would have had an impact on the ability of the children to retain some vestige of their Judaism in a totally alien environment — and pass on some knowledge of their Jewish heritage to future generations. Again, the historical records vary, but the general consensus is that the children were between the ages of two and eight.

Even though we would like to believe that these little children stubbornly clung to their Jewish faith, is there any evidence? When I passed this question to Professor Liba during a phone interview, he fairly bristled with indignation.

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*Professor Liba*
came to West Africa — were more interested in making their fortune than in preserving their Jewish traditions. Other wise, they would have fled to North Africa or to the Ottoman Empire, where there were established Jewish communities. In addition, Professor Liba has told me that Alvaro de Caminha, in letters he sent to Portugal, spoke of the children in the best possible light. The priests also left records that praised the children. This written evidence, which can be found in Lisbon in Portugal’s National Archives, seems to prove that the children submitted their fate, despite the presence of other Portuguese converts in the area. So, to put it in Professor Liba’s words, “As for observing Shabbos and kashrus you can forget about it.”

On the other hand, after 1497 all Iberian Jews, now dubbed New Christians, became masters of deception. With so many conversions wandering up and down the West African coast, was it possible that not one of them still had a “Jewish heart” and concerned himself with these children?

To see if there is another way to view the historical record, I turned to Norman Simmons, an associate professor at New Zealand’s University of Waikato, editor of the scholarly journal Montserrat/Monteserrat, and the author of an article where I was immediately caught my eye: “Did Any of the Captive Jewish Orphans of Sáo Tomé Ever Leave the Island?”

Caution: Speculation Ahead

“It is a mitzvah for me to help perpetuate the memories of these children,” Professor Simmons begins. “But first let me say that the history of these Jewish children cannot be proved in a strictly historical way. There is a lot of guess work but intelligent guess work. I hope. We know they were manumitted, or partly so, in about 1512, on condition that they marry with black slaves and remain on the island. After that, the evidence is patchy and almost everything I will say is more or less speculation.”

He then paints a possible psychological portrait of the children, based upon what we do know from the records: “These children, the ones who survived the rough treatment and diseases, would have been a hardy group. They came from poor and therefore nonprofessional Castilian-Jewish families. Their parents were the Jews who refused to convert. They would have had some Jewish education, and this minimal training would be what they passed on to each other over the next century or so.”

So the children were able to hang on to some semblance of their Jewish faith and practices? “This is very hard to know, because the only way to survive as a secret Jew was to maintain the secrecy. Nevertheless, we know that periodically the Church and the Crown sent to the island inquisitorial agents to root out the judaizers. There also may have been merchants and sailors who passed through who were secret Jews and carried the news back about these children of São Tomé, since there were accounts recorded about their ordeal. These visitors may have brought back some of the ‘children’ with them. We may also suppose they passed on a little Jewish knowledge and kept the secret community somewhat aware of conditions in Europe and elsewhere in the Portuguese Empire.”

Did any of the children ever manage to leave the island?

“It is likely that some of the children — twenty thirty years later, of course — did leave the island, for we find them arrested by the Inquisition in Italy and charged with judaizing.”

Definitely not

1472 Portugal discovers Sáo Tomé
1485 First Portuguese settlers arrive
1492 Expulsion of Jews from Portugal
1493 Jewish children exiled to Sáo Tomé
1494 Sugar production and slave trade begin
1495 All Jews living in Sáo Tomé are forcibly baptized
1500 Brazil is discovered
1506 Massacres of New Christians in Lisbon result in many fleeing to Africa; Crown issues “1,000 residents” on the island
1518 Some of the children married off to African slaves
1540s New Christians from Sáo Tomé go to Brazil to help with its sugar production
1550s By now most plantations owners on Sáo Tomé are of mixed race
1570s Filipe de Nis (formerly Solomon Marcus), a Portuguese New Christian active in the slave trade during the 1550s–1570s, is accused of Judaizing by jealous Old Christians on the island
1580s Sugar production begins to decline, due to competition from Brazil
1621 Bishop Francisco de Soveral is sent to Sáo Tomé to “eliminate the many Jews there” and on the West African mainland
1800s After cocoa is introduced in the early 1800s, Sáo Tomé becomes one of the world’s largest cocoa producers
1975 The islands of Sáo Tomé and Principe gain their independence from Portugal
1995 International conference on the Jewish children of Sáo Tomé held on the island
2003 Oil deposits are discovered off the coast
2010 Sáo Tomé opens tenders for oil exploitation

Is there any record of what happened to the children after they grew up?

“The most surprising thing is that by the turn of the seventeenth century, the descendants of the original Jewish slaves almost completely disappeared — and reappear in Brazil. The documents state that Jews from Sáo Tomé came to South America so that the sugar industry and Brazil quickly outproduced Sáo Tomé in this regard. Their sugar was also of a higher quality thanks to the climate and soil.”

In the mid-1600s, the Dutch colonized Brazil from Portugal and set up a short-lived colony where Jews were able to live openly as Jews. While some of the converts might have returned to Judaism, it seems that many did not. Their fears were perhaps justified when Portugal regained control in 1644. According to Professor Simmons, the conversos from Sáo Tomé then most likely did one of three things: returned further to the Brazilian wilderness, where they continued to live as conversos fled to nearby Surinam and joined a short-lived autonomous Jewish republic in the jungle known as Judensavanne or returned to Europe with the Dutch Jews.

Although the historical record agrees with Professor Simmons that sometime in the mid-1500s New Christians from Sáo Tomé went to Brazil to help build that country’s nascent sugar industry, a new question arises: Who went to Brazil? Were they really the descendants of the children who had survived there or were there other New Christians on the island?

Robert Garfield, author of A History of Sáo Tomé Island, believes that the descendants of the children were Sáo Tomé’s wealthiest and most powerful plantation owners. So would they have left behind their families and plantations to go all the way to Brazil? Another wrinkle is provided by historian Mylan Newitt, who believes that Portugal continued to use Sáo Tomé as a place of exile for conversos until the year 1553. Indeed, Professor Hull in his book, claims that by the 1540s, when conversos left Sáo Tomé for Brazil, the conversos were the dominant group on the island. So was it a different group of conversos who went to Brazil — and eventually returned to Europe — while the children’s descendants remained on Sáo Tomé? We will probably never know.

What Remains Today?

When Professor Liba was in Sáo Tomé back in the 1990s, the country’s then-prime minister, Miguel Trovoada, said to him, “Ambassador, we have common roots. The Jewish children brought here as slaves from Portugal were the first settlers of this island.”

Roots, yes. But what about branches? Does a trace remain of either the Jewish children or their descendants on the island, which is today mostly poor and very isolated place? Neither Professor Liba nor other scholars are encouraging. It’s true that some of the island’s approximately 150,000 citizens are light-skinned, but it’s just as likely that they are descendants of the Portuguese deportees as the conversos. Where is any evidence of physical or cultural traces?

Professor Liba recalls an encounter he had with Bishop Abílio Ribas, who was then the head of the Catholic Church on the island. Professor Liba asked if the Bishop knew where the children were buried — those who had died from malaria or from the crocodiles or snakes. Bishop Ribas replied, “Near the Cathedral!”

Bishop Ribas then explained that some twenty years earlier, when the Presidential Palace, which is located next to the Cathedral, was being built, the excavators discovered two things: the sword of Alvaro de Caminha, and the burial place of the Jewish children. Naturally, Professor Liba rushed to the site straight away.

“The story sounded plausible,” he recalls. “It’s a Christian tradition to have the graveyard near the church. But what is behind the church there was a small garden — and nothing else. No signs, no graves, no cross, no mention.” Professor Liba adds that he never saw a trace of the sword, either.

During his exploration of the island, Professor Liba did see two Jewish graves located off one corner of Sáo Tomé’s main cemetery, sticking out of the ground near the graves of São Tomé’s European neighbors. But as Professor Liba points out, after they date to the late 1800s (the Inquisition was abolished in 1821) and belong to two Moroccans — one from Morocco and the other from South America.

Another document, one dated April 24, 1691, and written by a local priest named Giuseppe Maria da Busseto, laments, “In this city, which has no bishop, if there are two priests, it is almost too many, since not many people come to the city. The bishop is a very poor man.”

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